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ABSTRACT

This digest summarizes the highlights of an analysis of assessment practices used in education and professional development for educators. A research team from RAND conducted a broad review of the literature and reviewed the documents of organizations engaged in such assessments. Researchers interviewed experts, attended conferences, and conducted site visits to exemplary programs. Findings show that the main task of assessment focuses on the quality and productivity of specific providers of education and professional development, but higher-level assessment of the system as a whole was also found to be crucial. The RAND study identified key similarities and differences among approaches to evaluation, and classified them into four models: (1) use of an intermediary organization to review the way individual providers assess their own quality and productivity; (2) actual assessment by an intermediary organization; (3) assessment by providers with no involvement of an intermediary; and (4) a focus on the learner that involves certification of student competencies. Factors that are important in choosing an approach to assessing the quality and productivity of providers were identified, and the advantages to each model were outlined. Regardless of the model selected, the study found that three key steps must be included by any provider of student assessment. The goals of the education activities must be identified, the outcomes related to those goals must be measured, and whether the outcomes met the goals must be evaluated. The literature provides guidelines for providers who want to develop their own evaluation measures. (SLD)

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Ensuring Quality and Productivity in Higher Education: An Analysis of Assessment Practices

By Susan M. Gates, Catherine H. Augustine, Roger Benjamin, Tora K. Bikson, Tessa Kaganoff, Dina G. Levy, Joy S. Moini, and Ron W. Zimmer

Introduction

Those responsible for education and professional development within systems such as corporations, state governments, and government agencies are concerned about the quality of those opportunities. As a result, they increasingly assign responsibility for ensuring the quality and productivity of education within the system to one particular office or agency. Often, such agencies receive little guidance about how to approach their task.

A RAND research team conducted a broad review of the general literature on the assessment of quality and productivity in education and professional development. The team also reviewed the documentation of organizations engaged in such assessment, interviewed experts, attended conferences, and conducted site visits to exemplary organizations. The ASHE-ERIC Report Vol. 29, No.1, Ensuring Quality and Productivity in Higher Education: An Analysis of Assessment Practices, synthesizes the Rand study findings and provides suggestions for approaches that might be useful for agencies given the task of ensuring the quality and productivity of education and professional development activities in a specific system. This ERIC Digest is based upon ASHE-ERIC Report Vol. 29, No.1, and briefly summarizes the Report highlights.

Why is System-Level Assessment Needed?

Although the main task of assessment focuses on the quality and productivity of specific providers of education and professional development, the study found that a higher-level assessment of the system as a whole is also crucial.

Such an assessment has two main purposes: (1) to determine whether the stakeholder and system-level needs are being addressed, and (2) to identify opportunities to improve efficiency in existing programs. In the first case, system-level assessment compares the needs of the population served with the programs offered in the system. In a corporate setting, for example, such an assessment might find that certain corporate-level goals are not being addressed by education and training programs run by individual business units. In higher education, a system-level assessment might find that certain geographical regions are not being well served by existing institutions in a state.

To achieve the second aim, the assessment examines whether the system's resources are being allocated efficiently. A number of organizations are improving their productivity through this process. For example, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board conducts regular program reviews to assess whether a proposed program is based on established needs, whether it duplicates other programs in the same area, and whether it falls within an institution's mission.

A clear trend in all the systems considered in the study is the development of a learning organization of some sort that is responsible for more than just the assessment of existing providers. These organizations promote communications among stakeholders and develop a clear link between education and professional development on the one hand and the basic mission of the system on the other. Corporate learning organizations describe this relationship as "becoming a strategic partner" in the corporation. Such an organization facilitates dialogue among key stakeholders, assembles information on workforce needs and existing programs, and serves as an interface between customers and providers.

What Approaches are Used to Assess Providers and Certify Students?

In reviewing a wide variety of assessment approaches, the Rand study identified key similarities and differences among the approaches and classified them into four basic models. The first model involves the use of an intermediary organization that is responsible for reviewing the process used by individual providers to assess their own quality and productivity. In the second model, an intermediary organization conducts the actual assessment of providers. In the third model, providers conduct their own assessment with no involvement of an intermediary. The fourth model differs from the other three in that it focuses on the learner rather than the provider and involves the certification of student competencies. Each approach has strengths and weaknesses that make it more appropriate for some circumstances than for others. For that reason, no one approach can be considered a best practice. The best approach depends on the context of the assessment.

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How Does One Choose a Model?

Many organizations whose job is to ensure the quality and productivity of education and professional development activities can be described as intermediary organizations. An intermediary is neither a provider of education and professional development nor a direct consumer of the services of such providers; it is an entity that promotes communication between the two. Models One, Two, and Four allow a role for an intermediary and are therefore the most relevant to such entities. Intermediaries might also wish to learn about the best practices under Model Three, however, to serve as a clearinghouse of information useful to provider institutions and to remain abreast of new assessment techniques initiated by providers.

The study identified six factors as the most important to consider in choosing an approach to assessing the quality and productivity of providers: (1) purpose of the assessment (accountability versus improvement), (2) level of authority, (3) level of resources, (4) centralization of operations, (5) system heterogeneity, and (6) system complexity.

The key advantage of Model One is that it delegates to provider organizations the task of defining goals, measuring outcomes, and evaluating outcomes. As a result, this approach can accommodate a system with many diverse providers. Because they have such control over their own assessment, providers are less likely to resist the process and are more likely to use it to promote improvements. The primary disadvantage of Model One relative to Model Two is that it emphasizes improvement over accountability. Model Two is better suited than Model One for accountability purposes, provided that the intermediary has the authority to ensure compliance. The main drawback to Model Two is that any approach imposed from an external organization runs the risk of focusing on inappropriate measures and failing to reflect institutional goals. Although Model Three is better suited for improvement, it does not include a role for an intermediary, though it can evolve into a process with a role for intermediaries. Model Four represents a completely different approach to assessment, one that focuses attention on the learner rather than the provider. Although Model Four focuses on student competencies, it indirectly holds institutions accountable by withholding competency status from students who have not received the requisite education from specific providers.

What is the Three-Step Process of Assessment?

Regardless of the model selected, the study found that three key steps must be included in any provider of student assessment: 1) Identifying goals of the education activities under consideration; 2) Measuring the outcomes related to those goals; and 3) Evaluating whether the outcomes meet those goals.

The Rand team's literature review revealed several broad lessons concerning these steps. First, each step should be linked to the others, and the process as a whole should be driven by the goals. It is especially important to avoid selecting measures before or without defining goals. Second, developing measures that relate to goals is a crucial if difficult step. It is often difficult to find an adequate measure of achievement for a particular goal. It is usually better to use an imperfect measure of a specific goal than it is to use a perfect measure of something different, however. Third, the trend in assessment is to focus less on input measures and more on process and outcome measures. Measuring outcomes along may not result in improvement, but considering the intervening processes that use resources to produce outcomes provides information more useful to program improvement. Finally, except for certificate or licensing programs, providers of professional development courses are not likely to be able to rely on preexisting evaluation tools with known validity and reliability characteristics. Rather, they will most likely have to develop measures of learning outcomes on their own. The literature provides some guidelines for developing such measures and for avoiding major sources of invalidity and unreliability. Intermediaries can play an important role by applying these guidelines to their own assessment processes and acting as clearinghouses of such information for providers engaged in assessment.

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